

BELMONT HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
Belmont Town Hall
January 5, 2006

Present: F. Yuan (Chair); J. Feins, D. Ruvolo, S. Shestakofsky, C. Williams, G. Barry, C. Morrissey, W. Rudman

Absent: C. Bannon, R. Gibson, M. Rawji

Guests and Liaisons Present: Dan Richards (Asst. Principal, Belmont High School), Maurice Wright (Metco Coordinator, Belmont High School), Burrell Clark (Metco Parent Liaison), Lt. Peter Hoerr (Belmont Police Dept.), Michael Collins (BAR), Laurie Graham (Special Ed Advisory Board, Disability Access Commission, Youth Commission)

1. The Chair called the meeting to order. Judie Feins volunteered to take the minutes.
2. The minutes of the meeting of December 8, 2005, were unanimously approved. There was some further discussion of the outcomes from the training the Commission members attended in early December. Members agreed there were some positive aspects of the day but also noted that the trainers from Visions did not follow the subcommittee's requests regarding a) an agenda, or b) using the background provided to them, so they could accelerate the process. Should we provide feedback to the organization on our experience? Members should e-mail Donna Ruvolo with their comments.
3. **Maurice Wright**, in his second year as the Metco coordinator at Belmont High, presented an overview of the program and of the students' experiences as people of color in Belmont. Metco has been in Belmont for a very long time, but the issues seem to endure. At present, BHS has a larger representation of students of color than ever before; the numbers are approximately these:
 - Around 40 Metco students;
 - Around 40 Choice students; and
 - About 50 students who live in Belmont.Choice students were invited and accepted when the high school had excess capacity, but the program is no longer taking new students.

The Metco students are all from Boston and are primarily African-American, but the program is open to Latino and Asian students, too. Whereas they used to come from the public or parochial schools, now they come from charter schools, too. The Boston public school system has become increasingly segregated over the last 20 years, and now the student body is 85% minority.

Due to funding cuts, there have been reductions in the number of Metco students at the elementary level. Also, the program is not for everyone: some students do leave it. But Belmont has a history of success in graduating many Metco students, and the School Department (particularly Supt. Holland) has been exceptionally supportive over the years.

Issues

In general: Residents seem wary of new faces of color, and of course the Metco students come and go as they proceed through school. So there are sometimes frictions, and Mr. Wright has met with the Police Department to address issues and to work on cooperation. Mr. Wright urges the students to be part of the community—to do community service, participate in sports and various organizations. Some work in local businesses. He tries to talk with them about dress and self-presentation, but there is a real generational divide: the young will wear current fashions no matter what the reaction. The students of color who live in Belmont feel somewhat isolated too, and Metco serves them as an anchor.

In the high school: BHS has no black teachers at all, and neither Mr. Wright nor Mr. Richards knew whether there had been recent efforts to recruit a more diverse faculty. It is difficult, because Belmont is expensive and perhaps not perceived to be a comfortable place to work or live. The Metco program would like to do more with multi-cultural education and with faculty training, which is greatly needed.

Steve Shestakofsky asked how the Human Rights Commission can: a) help with students' needs in the schools; b) help with Metco's relationship in the community; and c) do other things, such as dealing proactively with broader problems. Mr. Wright suggested that perhaps we could hold a public forum on diversity issues.

There was some discussion about Metco students with learning disabilities; something like 13 of the 40 students at BHS have IEPs, and Laurie Graham indicated that 40 of the 500 special education families in the Belmont school system have out-of-district addresses.

Laurie Graham asked how the Youth Commission could get Metco students involved in the Youth Center (on Friday nights) and other after-school activities. Burrell Clark (father of a Metco third-grader) indicated that he is looking for better ways to connect Metco students and families with host families and the rest of the community. For the elementary and middle schools, transportation is a major problem. (There is a late bus for the HS, funded from donations.) Would it be possible to run a bus from the Youth Center on Friday nights into Boston, to the Metco drop-off points?

Other ideas and suggestions: making sure Metco students have access to the Belmont skating rink, swimming pool, Little League, etc.; setting up an alternative to busing the kids home in snowstorms and other adverse situations; and having monthly coffees or similar events to bring parents together during weekend sports activities.

Mike Collins, the BAR liaison, noted that BAR has purchased a copy of the film *Far from Home*, which is about the daily life of a Metco student dealing with being in the Weston public schools. BAR would be happy to show the film on request.

4. **Dan Richards**, new Assistant Principal of BHS, informed the Commission about Diversity Week, which will take place at the high school the week of February 27-March 3. The organizers are trying to touch on themes of race, religion, sexual orientation, and more. The activities will take place throughout the school day, so teachers can bring classes in. Mr. Richards asked, "Can the HRC help fill that week with programs?"

Steve Shestakofsky replied that the HRC can work on the education aspects of the week, possibly offering a presentation on human rights.

5. The Commission discussed the most recent round of hate leafleting in Belmont. There were additional drops in several neighborhoods in December. We discussed whether the Belmont newspaper's naming of the organization last year may have encouraged them.

6. The Commission discussed revisions to the draft article by Chair Fran Yuan for the Belmont Citizen-Herald and also considered additional topics for the monthly column. It was suggested that we ask Peter Holland to write something about Metco, as he has been a leader in Belmont's support for the program.

7. The Commission discussed the need to get moving on additional activities under No Place for Hate, which requires us to carry out (two?) (three?) activities per year. The newspaper column is one. Donna Ruvolo mentioned the speaker in the fall who said that the key group to target as far as fighting hate crimes is males 13-19 years old. How do we do that? Should they be our key focus? Fran Yuan said she thought we needed to do something for the broader community. The music event we have been considering is a very large undertaking, and right now it does not seem like we have enough person-power behind it. We need to hear the proposal from member Moez Rawji and vote on whether we can handle it.

BAR liaison Mike Collins talked about an event BAR did on Islam, just after 9/11/2001. There was a speaker from the Islamic Center and participation by Belmont Muslims. There was food, music, and costumes. Why not repeat an event like this? Bill Rudman pointed out that it would be important to get a fair and balanced view from the speaker, so there would need to be screening beforehand. Steve Shestakofsky suggested that, instead, we wait to see what the BHS Diversity Week program is and take off from that. Connie Williams agreed that we should move more slowly on "events of our own," taking a careful look at their content. We are a public body.

8. Members were reminded to attend the Martin Luther King, Jr. Day breakfast on Jan. 16. The Commission is one of the event co-sponsors.

9. Steve Shestakofsky has drafted an incident report form and got a sample from Newton. He circulated these materials for discussion at next month's meeting, which is on February 2 from 7-9 in Room 1 (so wear warm clothes).

10. The meeting was adjourned at 9:15 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Judith Feins